

Colombia's Leader Offers Neutral Area For Hostage Talks

Proposal Falls Short of Key Rebel Demand

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BOGOTA, Colombia, Dec. 7 -- President Alvaro Uribe said Friday that his government was willing to meet with Marxist rebels in a specially demarcated swath of rural [Colombia](#) in a bid to win the release of high-profile hostages. The captives include a French-Colombian politician and three Pentagon contractors.

The announcement generated hope among hostages' families, and some analysts saw it as a reversal of the president's long-held pledge never to cede territory for talks with the rebels. But the offer fell short of a long-standing guerrilla demand calling for the demilitarization of two towns near the southern city of [Cali](#).

Uribe has been under growing pressure from the relatives of hostages, the French government and opposition figures to reach an accord with the [Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia](#), or FARC. Two weeks ago, Uribe cut off negotiations being brokered by Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez. Last week, the Colombian army seized a letter in which [Ingrid Betancourt](#), whose liberation has become a priority for [France](#), described the despair of her nearly six years in captivity.

In a speech in [Bogota](#) on Friday, Uribe said he had accepted a proposal from the Catholic Church to create what he called "a meeting zone" for talks with the FARC. "My countrymen, we have done and will do all we can to liberate our hostages," the president said.

Uribe authorized the government's top negotiator, Luis Camilo Restrepo, to meet with church leaders and the rebels to find an appropriate zone. He said it should encompass about 58 square miles, be free of military bases and be sparsely populated. International monitors would be present for talks, he said, and weapons would not be permitted.

The president stressed that he took care to ensure that his "democratic security" policy -- the government's aggressive, U.S.-backed effort to fight rebels, which has been popular here -- is not compromised. Uribe's predecessor, Andrés Pastrana, ceded a [Switzerland](#)-size swath of the country to the FARC for talks; the rebels then used the land to hide hostages, store arms and plan military strikes.

Alvaro Leyva, a former government minister who has served for years as an intermediary with the FARC, said in an interview that he did not think the rebels would accept Uribe's offer. The rebels are obsessed with their security, Leyva said, and have long insisted on the demilitarization of the towns of Pradera and [Florida](#) because they would have escape routes there, should the talks break down.

"They are people with no trust," said Leyva, who has frequently spoken to rebel commanders. "If you keep history in mind, the response is logical -- no."

He noted that despite various gestures and offers from the government, the 43-year-old guerrilla movement has remained steady in its demand to hold the talks in Pradera and Florida, a combined area about the size of [New York City](#). The guerrillas also have never laid down their arms, even in negotiations.

In a speech that lasted more than an hour, Uribe spent only a few minutes discussing his proposal for talks. He spent most of the time excoriating the FARC, which has little popular support in Colombia and is listed by the [State Department](#) as a terrorist group.

The president, whose father was killed by rebels, equated the suffering of hostages to that of Jews in Nazi concentration camps and compared the rebel group to [Adolf Hitler](#). He also recounted the long, brutal history of kidnapping in Colombia, saying the rebels have held more than 750 hostages. And he accused the FARC of repeatedly lying and backing out of its promises.

"This government has never lied," Uribe asserted. "They've always lied."

The president, though, came under sharp criticism after he ended Chávez's role as mediator in talks designed to establish an exchange of prisoners between the FARC and Uribe's government. Days after Uribe's decision, which was issued Nov. 21 with little explanation, Chávez reacted with fury, calling Uribe a "liar" and freezing relations with Colombia.

Nicolás Maduro, [Venezuela's](#) foreign minister, later said during a talk show on state television that Chávez had been advancing in talks with the rebels but that Uribe had ended the effort because his government did not really want a peaceful solution. "In December we were going to have the first accord and have the first hostages freed," he said last week. "When they saw it was irreversible and was advancing, they went back on it, because they don't believe in peace."

The release of Betancourt's letter, along with videos of her and several other hostages, including the three Americans who were captured in 2003, has helped generate more interest in the hostages in foreign capitals. In recent days, [President Bush](#) has spoken by telephone with Uribe about the captives. And Thursday, French President [Nicolas Sarkozy](#) made an unusual appeal to Manuel Marulanda, the FARC commander.

"I do not share your ideas, and I condemn your methods," Sarkozy said in a televised message. But he said the FARC "must save a woman in danger of death.

"You can show the world that the FARC understands humanitarian imperatives," Sarkozy said.

The FARC responded testily to Sarkozy's plea. The French, nevertheless, continued to press. On Friday, David Martinon, Sarkozy's spokesman, said French agents have been in contact with the FARC about Betancourt, who turns 46 on Dec. 25.

In her 12-page letter, Betancourt sounded resigned and on the verge of giving up, saying that her hair is falling out in clumps and that she cannot eat. She also wrote in tender terms about her children, Lorenzo Delloye, 19, who lives in [Paris](#), and Melanie Delloye, 22, who is studying in [New York](#).

In a radio address Friday from Paris, Lorenzo Delloye urged his mother not to give up. He spoke on Radio France Internationale, one of the stations that Betancourt had said in her letter she could hear in the jungle.

"I want you to live," he told her. "I want you to eat and have the will to live."